

## **A Night Beneath the Moon and the Stars by Tonight.At.Noon**

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**Summary:** Jonathan finds Nancy at their school's annual sit-in.

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He finds her by accident. Like always, it seems. She is sitting by the water fountains next to the girl's bathroom on the second floor, her eyes closed as she leans her head against the white-painted wall. Dry tears stain her face. There is a trail of black that reaches her chin. Something inside him lurches—he cannot bear to see Nancy Wheeler sad. He wonders if it is Steve. Downstairs, in the gymnasium, Jonathan saw him talking to Carrie Goddard. She's blond and tall, but not as beautiful as Nancy. Not as strong.

Jonathan isn't aware how much time slips by as he watches Nancy Wheeler cry silently in the hallway, but when he realises the implications of his presence, he begins to leave, set on returning to the gymnasium. But a voice stops him mid-turn, and he twists his neck to find its source. Nancy has opened her eyes, and they are focused on him. She frowns, but not out of anger. Merely out of confusion.

"The bathroom on the first floor was full," he explains before she can question why he is up there. "I didn't want to wait. Sorry for disturbing you, I'll go back to the gym."

He begins to walk away, but again, a voice causes his footsteps to halt.

"No," she says firmly, "stay."

Jonathan immediately starts shaping an argument in his mind, words to excuse him from the situation, but Nancy's sad eyes are pleading with him, so he walks towards her and sits the other side of the water fountains, his legs crossed like hers. They sit in silence for a time. Downstairs, a buzzing noise from the cafeteria and gymnasium rises to their ears, a loud amalgamation of hundreds of conversations happening at once. Jonathan wonders what they are all talking about. It's nearly midnight. The teachers will be shutting off the lights soon, and the voices will stop at once, only to rise again minutes later

in the form of whispers.

Though the hour is late and the sun abandoned them long ago, Jonathan doesn't want sleep. He wants this—quietness with Nancy. Since the attacks in Hawkins last year, she has been more than willing to speak to him during school hours, but it is his favourite when they sit together at her kitchen table, sharing small half-smiles and red-stained cheeks, while they wait for Will, brave Will who still screams in the night, to gather his things and say goodbye to Mike.

But he is always happy when she breaks the silence open with her words.

"Did your mom make you come to this thing too?" she asks softly, her voice cancelling out the wave of humming still radiating from the bottom level of the building.

Jonathan wasn't forced to come here tonight. He wanted to come, to see her. He knows it's bad—she's with Steve, Steve is better now—but every single time he looks at Nancy, the air evaporates from his lungs. He can't tell her these things, though, so he says instead, "Yeah. Said it would do me good to spend time with my peers. Apparently I lock myself in my room too much."

Nancy takes the bait. He has always been a proficient liar.

"And do you?" she asks, and Jonathan doesn't need to be looking at her to know she is wearing just the tiniest hint of a smile. "Spend too much time locked in your bedroom?"

"Not any more than normal," he responds. Jonathan, head against the wall, rotates his eyes towards Nancy. "What about you? What was your mother's reason?"

She shakes her head and clicks her tongue almost in disgust. "You need to make memories, Nancy," she imitates, picking at a stray string coming loose on her sweater. "I'd rather not remember tonight, if I'm honest."

Jonathan does not ask why. He is good like that.

"I'm sorry," he offers, noticing the absence of voices from downstairs.

He looks out the window at the end of the hall. The moon is high in Hawkins tonight. Full and bright. If only he had his camera with him.

"It's okay," Nancy shrugs. "I've stopped expecting too much from Steve, anyway. The things he does shouldn't surprise me anymore."

It is Steve, then. He hates being right about these things. Steve was supposed to have changed. The monster was supposed to have knocked some sense into him. But bad boys are sinister at their roots, Jonathan knows. It was only a matter of time before the nice guy that bought him a replacement camera transformed back into the person that destroyed it in the first place.

"I"— Jonathan begins, but Nancy cuts him off sharply.

—"Don't say you're sorry again, Jonathan. Please. You're always apologising for things you have no hand in."

He's about to say *sorry* once more, but cuts himself off before he can open his mouth.

Steve should treat her better. He's a fool not to.

"I don't want to go back down there," Nancy whispers a short while later. Her eyes are watching an ant crawl across the deserted hallway, a piece of broken off cracker in its pincers.

Jonathan doesn't blame her for wanting to stay away from the gym. They were both assigned to the gymnasium for the annual sit-in along with Steve and that Carrie girl. Jonathan doesn't want to return either. If they did, there would be questions. Why were they gone in the first place? What were they doing? Steve would find his coming into the room with Nancy by his side as reason to mock him and rustle his feathers. The teachers would find it reason to separate them, and Jonathan dislikes that thought.

"Let's go, then," Jonathan suggests suddenly, the idea popping into his head in a rush. He jumps to his feet and holds out his hand.

"And where on earth would we go?"

"Anywhere."

His hand is still extended, his brows up and his eyes hopeful. It takes a few moments of agony, but the instant Nancy places her hand in his, Jonathan lifts her to her feet. They run down the stairs together as quietly as they can. Jonathan can hear his heart pounding wildly in his ears as adrenaline spikes his blood supply. He is escaping with Nancy Wheeler. A giddy smile pulls across his face.

Reaching the front doors to the school, Jonathan skids to a halt, holding his breath when Nancy lets out a small squeak of surprise at the sudden stop. When no armed guards come rushing to see what the commotion is, he tests one of the doors, exhaling a sigh of relief when it opens. He holds it, allowing Nancy to leave first, and follows behind her as he searches his pockets for his keys.

It is a windy evening in the middle of spring. The scent of the air is warm. Calming. He thinks of where they can go. Somewhere the memories of last winter won't disturb them. He remembers the field—the one his father used to take him to when he was still around and wanted to keep Jonathan out of his hair for an hour or two. There is a lake nearby the open land with a clean dock that floats atop the water. Jonathan takes a quick glance at the sky and sees the stars, and he knows where he will take her.

They are quiet again as Jonathan drives them to their destination. Nancy asks no questions. She trusts him, which is good. Once they arrive at the empty field, Jonathan removes a blanket from the boot of his car and they walk ten minutes towards the vast lake. The moon and the bright stars light their way.

"I didn't know somewhere like this existed in Hawkins," Nancy says when they reach the dock.

Jonathan steps on first, offering a hand once more to Nancy. And like before, she accepts, allowing Jonathan to guide her onto the unsteady dock. As she finds her footing, Jonathan spreads the blanket out and lies down. He folds his arms behind his head, watching Nancy Wheeler watch the stars.

"There are places like this everywhere," Jonathan responds. "It's just a matter of knowing how to find them."

Nancy turns her head and looks down at him. She is silhouetted against the harsh light of the moon. "And how did you find this place?"

"I got lucky," he says.

Seeming to accept his answer, Nancy decides to come lie by him. They are so close; her hip is resting against his. Soon, the lull of the swaying dock and the sighing of the breeze and the warmth of Nancy's presence is enough to send Jonathan to sleep. And he slumbers beneath the sky, a strong and beautiful girl by his side.

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When Jonathan wakes hours later, mind still half-asleep, he sees Nancy is already up. She is sitting at the end of the dock, the legs of her trousers rolled up, feet dangling in the water. Crawling to her, he removes his own shoes and socks and slowly eases his feet into the lake. Upon first contact with the water, his skin rises with goosebumps, but the cold knocks the fuzz out of his head, so the chill is worth it.

"I'm pretty sure there are man-eating eels in this lake, but I've come to terms with my fate if they decide to drag me in," Nancy comments, keeping her eyes glued to the water.

Jonathan watches her profile. Her makeup has run even more in the night, but she looks fresh-faced and well-rested, even though they couldn't have slept more than five hours. She is smiling as she watches a fish jump into the air and land back in the water with a splash. What a difference a night in the open will make.

"Thank you for this," she says, tearing her attention away from the lake. "Really, Jonathan."

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad I could help."

The pair begin a quiet conversation, skipping around topics and telling stories as the sun takes its place in the sky following the moon's descent behind the earth. When their stomachs begin rumbling, Nancy asks if they can catch some breakfast at a diner she knows from family road trips. Jonathan readily accepts her suggestion and

they walk back to the car, their shoes in their hands and the blanket slung over his shoulder.

Jonathan wonders if Steve worried about Nancy in the night. He wonders if Steve even noticed she had disappeared. He wonders if Nancy is thinking the same thing.

After breakfast, Jonathan drives Nancy back to her home. Students will have left the sit-in by now, so her return will not seem so out of place. Jonathan puts his car in park, waiting as Nancy gathers the few things she brought back from the diner.

"Thanks again, Jonathan," she says, the sincerity and depth in her tone overwhelming. "I mean it."

And with that, she exits the vehicle. He watches her run to the door, driving away only after she has waved goodbye and entered the house.

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The following Monday, it is all around school that Nancy Wheeler broke up with Steve Harrington over the weekend. He overhears during English that Steve came to her house after the sit-in, asking where she had been. Apparently, he was her ride home and he got worried when he couldn't find her. Jonathan knows Nancy hadn't revealed her location because his name had been left out of the gossip column, but her silence on the matter has not done him any favours. Steve finds him after school lets out in the empty student parking lot. Jonathan had been in the dark room, hoping to avoid a situation exactly like this.

He remembers all too well what happened last time Steve cornered him.

"Marla Grey said she saw you come into the gym, but you were gone come morning," Steve says as he approaches Jonathan. He reminds the photographer of a vulture circling its prey. "You were with her, weren't you?"

"You don't deserve her," Jonathan says in response, surprised at the strength in his voice. He stares Steve directly in the eye. He isn't

backing down. Steve has been treating him like shit for too long.

"Look who finally found some ground to stand on," Steve applauds, his face split with a humourless smile. "Too bad I'm going to have to knock you off of it."

Jonathan starts backing away as Steve advances. As much as he wants to stand up to Steve, he doesn't want a repeat of the cinema confrontation. His hand still hurts sometimes when the nights get cold enough.

"This isn't going to solve anything," Jonathan tries, knowing mere words won't make an angry, despondent Steve rethink his attack. "It'll just make her hate you more."

"Why does she hate me in the first place!" Steve shouts. They've stopped their dance at the edge of the parking lot. "What did I do?"

The poor guy seems genuinely confused. His ignorance almost makes Jonathan laugh.

"You really don't understand? Steve, you walk all over her," Jonathan explains. "You make her feel like shit, like she's not worth anything. You kiss her and tell her she's the only one for you, then you turn around and ignore her and flirt with every girl you set your sights on. She deserves better than you."

"You mean she deserves you?"

"That's not what I said," Jonathan defends.

Steve releases a laugh bitter enough to melt the tar beneath their feet. "Oh, no. But it's what you meant." Steve inhales a sharp breath. "You know I still get nightmares about that thing? It's still here. Always here." He punctuates his words by drilling a pointer finger into his temple. "I can't lose her, Byers. She's the only thing that keeps the nightmares at bay."

Jonathan wishes he felt sorry for the boy in front of him, but he doesn't. He gets them too, the nightmares. They all do. He can imagine how badly they've effected the brain of Steve Harrington, who probably thought he was invincible before their encounter with



the beast. But it doesn't excuse his treatment of Nancy. Last November should have made him appreciate her more, not make him think she was only good as his dreamcatcher.

"It's not up to me," Jonathan says. "Nancy's made her decision."

Jonathan walks past Steve, unsurprised when he doesn't lash out, and goes to his car. His heart is ramming so hard into his ribs it hurts, but the pain is welcome.

Pulling into his driveway, Jonathan sees somebody sitting on his front porch. As he gets closer, he realises it is Nancy. She stands when he pulls into his spot and tugs the hem of her shirt.

"What are you doing here?" he asks as he makes his way towards her.

"Kirsten Graham saw you and Steve in the parking lot and called me. She said it looked like you two were about to get into a fight." Nancy's eyes swivelled around his face, checking for any signs of damage.

Jonathan doesn't think about what it means that she came to him and not Steve.

"There was no fight," he assures her. "I'm fine."

Nancy doesn't say anything else. She chews her bottom lip and scans his face again.

Jonathan laughs and grabs her shoulders without thinking. "Nancy, I swear to you, I'm fine."

Even after his laugh dies out, he is still holding onto her. The sound of their combined breathing—heavy and loud—is the only noise assaulting their ears. Jonathan isn't sure what to say. He isn't sure of anything, really. He is still high from his verbal clash with Steve. All he knows is how good it feels to be touching Nancy Wheeler, and how he never wants to release her ever again.

"Nancy, I"—

"No more talking, Jonathan," Nancy says, sounding as though she just

ran a marathon. Her breath is coming fast, her words are disjointed. "Just—no more."

Jonathan is confused by her words for only a millisecond. Before he can be nervous, before he allows himself to think about the state of his chewed lips, Nancy Wheeler is on her toes and her arms are around his neck. She pulls him to her, and the moment their mouths meet is a moment Jonathan will remember for the rest of his life. It is like the drop of a big roller coaster. Jonathan's stomach flips before slamming into his toes. His heart races. Stars collide behind his clenched eyes as Nancy's open mouth sways with his.

He imagines this is what it feels like to fly.

Though it probably lasts only a few seconds, when Nancy breaks away from him it feels like they have been connected for eons. And he knows how silly that sounds, how ridiculous of a notion it is, but he can't describe it any other way.

Jonathan is about to say something—though *what*, he isn't exactly sure—but the sound of Will returning home on his bike stops him from ruining the moment by saying something stupid.

"Hey, buddy, how was school?" he asks as Will gently places his bike against the ground. He hopes Will cannot hear the tremor in his voice.

"It was okay," he says, his voice rising on the last word when he catches sight of Nancy. "What are you doing here? And why are your lips so red?"

"Um," Jonathan stalls, searching his brain for any kind of excuse. "Nancy's here to drop something off for a . . . project we're doing together."

"Yeah," Nancy chimes in. She reaches into the front pocket of her jeans and pulls out an old tube of chapstick. "It's for a . . ." Nancy stares wildly at him, the veins in her neck poking through.

"Science project," Jonathan supplies quickly. "That's why our lips are red. We're testing to see which brands of chapstick really work."

Will isn't an idiot, not by far, but he takes the explanation with a shrug before heading inside. Jonathan breathes out when the door closes. Sweat has begun to bead on his palms.

"Nancy, you didn't have to"—

"I know," she says firmly. "I wanted to." She looks down at her watch and offers Jonathan a small, apologetic smile. "I have to go. I promised my mom I'd help make dinner tonight. But I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Jonathan nods. "Yeah, okay."

Nancy comes up to him again and presses her warm, red lips against his rough cheek. "Hey," she says, pulling away. "Maybe we can go to the lake again tomorrow after school. If you're not busy."

Jonathan is sure his face and neck have taken on a ruddy undertone, but he finds it in himself to respond casually. "That sounds like it could be fun."

Nancy lets out a small laugh as she starts walking away. "Great. I'll meet you by your car after school, then."

"See you there," he calls.

He remains outside for a little while longer, watching as her figure disappears down the road.